

The Hunger Games
Rationale by Heather Teater

Author: Suzanne Collins
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Plot Summary

In *The Hunger Games*, North America has experienced disasters, droughts, storms, fires, floods, and then war for the remaining resources. The survivors formed a capitol city in the Rocky Mountains, referred to as the Capitol, and the rest of the population was divided into 13 districts that surrounded it. Growing weary of oppression, the 13 districts rose up against the Capitol, but were defeated, mainly because of the Capitol's geographical advantage. The 13th district was destroyed, and the other districts were forced to continue providing resources (food, coal, textiles, etc.) to the Capitol. The leadership in the Capitol enacted new laws and practices, including the Hunger Games, to remind the districts of their place. The Hunger Games are an annual competition where one male and female young adult from each district are randomly selected to compete against the others until one survivor remains. Katniss Everdeen, a 16-year-old from District 12, finds herself in the Games after volunteering in the place of her 12-year-old sister Prim. Katniss must figure out who to trust and how to survive.

Grade Level and Audience

Common Sense Media, a non-profit organization that provides ratings for age-appropriate media for children and teens, has rated *The Hunger Games* appropriate for young adults who are age 12 and older. Violence, drinking, and a romantic relationship are depicted in this book. However, I believe that the students in our advanced junior and senior English classes are emotionally prepared to handle these elements. They are equipped to understand the deeper meanings and themes in this book and to discuss these themes and complicated scenarios in a mature manner. I will also show clips of the movie based on this book to promote discussions of the setting and characters in the book, but will avoid showing any scenes portraying violence or romance.

Redeeming Values and Literary Qualities

In a review for *The New York Times*, John Green explained the literary value of *The Hunger Games* in the following way:

Nor is there anything spectacular about the writing — the words describe the action and little else. But the considerable strength of the novel comes in Collins's convincingly detailed world-building and her memorably complex and fascinating heroine. In fact, by not calling attention to itself, the text disappears in the way a good font does: nothing stands between Katniss and the reader, between Panem and America.

This makes for an exhilarating narrative and a future we can fear and believe in, but it also allows us to see the similarities between Katniss's world and ours. American luxury, after all, depends on someone else's poverty. Most people in Panem live at subsistence levels, working to feed the cavernous hungers of the Capital's citizens. Collins sometimes fails to exploit the rich allegorical potential here in favor of crisp plotting, but it's hard to fault a novel for being too engrossing. (para. 14-15)

This book is engaging for readers because of characters who must develop in the face of adversity and the world that the author has created. I chose to teach this book because I believe that it has educational significance that can be conveyed in an engaging and relevant way. *The Hunger Games* provides opportunities to discuss literary elements, such as plot, character development, symbolism, and imagery. It also lends itself to discussions of ethical concerns, especially in regard to poverty, injustice, unreliable leadership, and the value of human life. In our class, we will discuss themes of survival, humanity, identity,

and oppression. We will discuss the effects of war on children and society, and about the manipulation and corruption practiced by the authority figures in the novel. I believe that this book presents an opportunity to discuss some of these issues with students in a genuine and appealing way. Based on the popularity of this book, and the subsequent movie, this book is culturally relevant. More than 73,000 reviews have been given for this book on Amazon, and the movie made more than \$400 million dollars in theaters. Your student may have already had exposure to many of the ideas introduced, and I believe we can discuss them in a way that is safe and helpful to students. I will use the following objectives, activities, and essay questions to discuss this book and learn from it in order for students to grow and hopefully become lifelong readers.

Teaching Objectives

- For students to enjoy reading and to become lifelong readers
- To make a bridge between student's everyday lives and quality literature
- To engage students in the reading and writing process
- To help students assess and understand their world and conflicting ideologies that exist in it
- For students to develop critical thinking and improve their communication skills

Possible Student Activities

Socratic circles—Students would be asked questions about whether Katniss is justified in her actions in the Hunger Games and why they believe that she is or is not. They would discuss with other students and defend their rationale. This conversation might introduce dialogue about self-defense, the value of human life, and the value of family and community relationships.

Creative writing—Students would be encouraged to write or film a game show or reality television show where characters from the book interact with one another. They could also rewrite a scene from another character's perspective or about a utopian or dystopian society and what qualities or behaviors they would expect to find there.

Character development—Identity and the perception of others are key elements in this book. Students would have the opportunity to write about who Katniss Everdeen is compared to how she is seen by others. They could compare her to other characters in the book, such as Prim, her mother, Peeta, or Gale, or answer the question of what makes up our identity and who we are.

Possible Essay Questions

1. Describe the setting of this novel. What is the origin of Panem? How and why is it divided? In what ways is it similar or dissimilar from our own world?
2. Describe the Reaping in the novel, including the process and purpose of it. How are different districts affected by the Reaping? Describe tesserae and those who are most and least affected by it.
3. What are some of the ways that a child might be affected by losing a parent or having an unreliable parent? Describe the physical and emotional concerns, as well as, the pressures for the oldest child in a family like this. Do you see these concerns in Katniss, and do they help her or hurt her in the Games?

Optional Novels

If you are uncomfortable with your student reading or discussing this novel, please speak with me, and we can select another novel with similar themes, such as one of the following novels, and comparable assignments for your student.

Paulsen, Gary. (1987). *Hatchet*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.

Stuck in the Canadian wilderness, the main character, Brian, has few resources available to him. Similar to *The Hunger Games*, *Hatchet* is a novel dealing with survival and self-reliance that is told from the perspective of a young adult.

Lowry, Lois. (1993). *The Giver*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.

In *The Giver*, the main character, Jonas, discovers that the authorities have withheld information from the people. There are some similarities between Jonas and Katniss, who has to decide how much she can rebel against an unfair system and whether it will affect those she loves most.

Dashner, James. (2009). *The Maze Runner*. New York, NY: Delacorte Press.

Thomas wakes up with no memory, in *The Maze Runner*. He is stuck inside a maze, and like Katniss in *The Hunger Games*, he will have to figure out how to survive and who he can rely on.

Bronte, Charlotte. (1847). *Jane Eyre*. London, England: Smith, Elder, and Co.

Jane, the main character of *Jane Eyre*, has lived a troubled life. Her childhood is marked by loss, suffering, and neglect. Even though the setting and circumstances are very different, Jane also deals with questions of survival, identity, and unreliable authority figures.

Melville, Herman. (1851). *Moby-Dick*. New York, NY: Harper & Brothers.

Captain Ahab is obsessed with finding Moby-Dick, a great white whale. In his boundless pursuit, the rest of the crew is placed in harm's way. This book also deals with themes of survival and with unreliable authority figures.

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